

Empathy vs. Compassion

When there is perceived to be a problem, the first instinct is to assign blame. In the discussion on healthcare cost transparency, I have heard what I construe as at least partial blame for escalating costs to specific groups thought to be excessive users of the healthcare resources available, one such group being Medicare recipients. Another group is Medicaid recipients. It is easy to blame the victim, therefore absolving the discomfort to the perpetrator(s) of the situation. This limits the chances of accurately defining the problem (in our case, price transparency and other undefined tangential contributors) and finding a solution that works for everyone.

There are two tools, now becoming more widely touted, but underutilized because of lack of understanding of what they really are and how they can be effectively used to guide decision making. The tools are empathy and compassion. Because of this lack of understanding, until a few years ago, having empathy was equated with being weak and most certainly a pejorative description of someone.

I'd like to support you in doing your work by sharing with you clearer understanding of both empathy and compassion.

Contrary to popular belief, you can care deeply about someone or something and not be empathetic, as I understand empathy.

Empathy is understanding, often by imagining yourself in someone else's shoes-even if you don't approve or agree with their actions. This can be challenging. Empathy is a muscle to be exercised if your desire is to become competent in connecting with those not in your social or economic circle, creating opportunity to meet everyone's needs.

People of privilege may find it difficult to be empathetic. It has been well documented, including in the research by [L. Taylor Phillips](#), a PhD student at Stanford Graduate School of Business, and [Brian Lowery](#), the Walter Kenneth Kilpatrick Professor of Organizational Behavior at Stanford GSB shows, "People feel better about what they have if they believe they have earned those things as a result of hard work, not via birthright. So denying built-in advantages is essentially a form of self-protection." People born of privilege often believe, those who are not successful are that way because they have not worked hard enough and/or not intelligent enough.

If empathy is understanding, compassion is a "call to action". The action you take is not based on what *you* believe is best for the other person. You cannot have compassion without the understanding obtained by empathic connection that identifies the needs of the party. Only then can a strategy for solution be determined that meets the needs of all parties, not at the expense of one party or another.

By using the tools of empathy and compassion, autonomy and choice is preserved for the healthcare consumer allowing them to take personal responsibility for their healthcare and contributing to the common good.